

Missional Journal

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Missional, Emerging, Emergent: A Traveler's Guide Part A

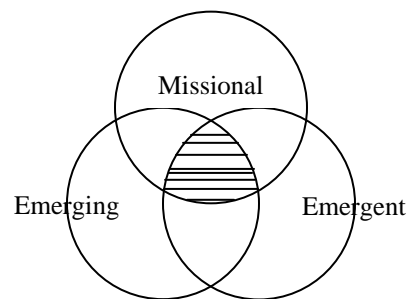
Let's face it, today's ecclesiastical landscape is confusing. In addition to all the old categories (fundamentalist, evangelical, mainline, etc.) we now have a number of terms that reflect the bubbling ferment within the American church. The terms "missional," "emerging," and "emergent" pop up with increasing frequency and little precision. The result is that communication gets messy and many people are perplexed about who's on first and who's on second.

My approach to the confusion has been to identify myself as clearly as I can with the missional church discussion. Yet I continue to get questions and comments from people who make no distinction (or what I think is the wrong distinction) between these terms. So I thought I should put my hand to a little mapping exercise—although it seems in some ways like an impossible task!

Let me start with a few basic points of orientation:

1. **All three of these terms identify renewal movements.** As I mentioned in my previous [Missional Journal](#) article, renewal groups evaluate the present situation of the church with a critical eye. They agree that the Western church is in crisis and that those of us *inside* the church must accept responsibility for the situation. They also agree that solutions to the problems will not be found just by trying a little harder or upping our commitment to the methods and forms of an earlier day.

Perhaps a diagram would be helpful:



The shaded area indicates the common ground and shared concerns of the three movements. The non-overlapping parts of these circles indicate the different emphases or "flavors" in each grouping. There is no attempt to draw

to scale, either in suggesting the respective size of the groups or the degree of agreement between them.

2. **These are not clear-cut categories.** If you are looking for labels to pin on folks you will quickly get into trouble. These terms are more like “areas of concern” with a basic center that attracts particular people or shapes their discussions about the church. Once you move out from the center it is much harder to identify what constitutes, for example, a “missional” as opposed to an “emergent” position. And, actually, there are often broad areas of similarity.
3. The most helpful way for me to sort things out is to try to **identify how and where these three terms entered the mainstream of discussion.** All terminology gets more diffused with time, but perhaps we can generate more understanding by first getting a little background. The danger in this attempt to simplify is that we will *oversimplify*, but that’s a risk that must be borne.
4. I should also remind you that **we need to strive for careful listening and fairness to everybody in these discussions** (including those who disagree). You should not draw conclusions about what people believe on various points of theological concern merely because they identify with a missional, emerging, or emergent perspective. In fact, participants in these movements (both individuals and congregations) run the gamut from conservative to Protestant mainline.

For example, Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, is deeply committed to a missional vision for ministry. So is Patrick Kiefert, professor of theology at Luther Seminary in Minneapolis and president of Church Innovations, a missional consulting group. But this common missional interest really tells us little about how either of these men frame their specific views on a whole host of theological and ecclesiological topics.

Now with these preliminaries out of the way, let’s look at each of the terms. First I will attempt a working definition. Then I’ll list some of the key people and organizations in each heading.

Missional

1998 is probably a good date to mark the appearance of the missional church movement. That year saw the publication of *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America*, edited by Darrell Guder. The book combined the efforts of six members of the [Gospel and Our Culture Network](#), an American study-group wrestling with the questions and insights of the British missionary theologian Lesslie Newbigin. After decades as a missionary to India, Newbigin had returned to a clearly post-Christian Britain where the church had “lost home-court advantage”—my metaphor, not his. **Newbigin realized that a church-centered and building-centered understanding of the gospel was no longer adequate to the challenge of the multi-cultural realities of late modernity.**

At the heart of *Missional Church* is a profoundly theological understanding of mission. To say it simply: God is a missionary God. Mission is about “sending” and this sending is the unifying theme of biblical history. Scripture finds its narrative center in the sending of God’s Son into the world and the subsequent sending of the Holy Spirit to empower God’s people for their missionary task. From this angle we may understand the statement: the church doesn’t *have* a mission, the church *is* mission. In other words, mission is not one point on the job description of the Christian community—it is the organizing principle of the community.

Missional Church contains not only powerful and thought-provoking analyses of the current challenges before the church, but also theologically and biblically creative suggestions for moving ahead. A lot has been published since 1998, but this book is still worth reading.

Major contributors to the missional movement include:

Darrell Guder, academic dean of Princeton Theological Seminary, editor of *Missional Church*, and author of *The Continuing Conversion of the Church* [Eerdmans, 2000]. Other contributors to *Missional Church* continue to exert significant influence through writing, teaching, and consulting. I think particularly of George Hunsberger, professor of congregational mission at Western Seminary (Holland, Michigan); Craig Van Gelder, professor of congregational mission at Luther Seminary (St. Paul, Minnesota); and Alan Roxburgh, vice-president of [Allelon](#) Canada and coordinator for the [Mission in Western Culture](#) project.

Earlier in the article I mentioned Lutheran theologian Patrick Keifert. My colleague here at Biblical Seminary, John Franke, is increasingly involved in the missional discussion. In Southern Baptist circles missiologist and author Ed Stetzer is probably the leading advocate for the missional movement. Stetzer has had a significant influence on Mark Driscoll, pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, Washington and co-founder of the [Acts 29](#) church-planting network.

The most influential organization supporting the missional vision is Allelon, a non-profit foundation located in Eagle, Idaho, and a clearinghouse for all things missional. Spend a little time on Allelon’s informative web site to take the pulse of the movement.

In the next *Journal* we’ll try to sort out “emerging” and “emergent.” Stay tuned!

